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Sue Marxheimer
66 Westridge Rd
Edmonton, AB T5T 1B4
PH: (780) 487-4941
e-mail: suemar@telus.net

Another Crossing

The sky was steel, overcast, the ocean forboding, calm, as the big liner's horn let out its mournful warning wail. She pulled out into the English Channel and then into the Atlantic for the crossing to North America. On June 25, l947 the HMSS Aquitania, an unconverted troopship, sailed out of Southampton bound for Halifax, Canada.

The majority of passengers were emigrants from various parts of Europe, bound for 'better' opportunities in the New World. The wharf was a mass of confusion as people speaking many languages tried to hold onto their belongings and their families while they boarded the ship. Their nostrils were accosted by an overriding stink of oil and smoke, mixed with the pungent odor of foods being loaded. The great height of the ship and swinging cranes dwarfed them. Sweating bodies rubbed against one another, and tried to part again as they pushed their way up the gangway. Many turned one more time to wave to friends and relatives on the dock.

As the ship set in motion, the mass of humanity moved, almost as one, first to the land-side rail, and then aft to see, as long as possible the receeding shore and all they were leaving behind. Many wept openly, as they watched the known, if uncomfortable past slip away from them, replaced only by the uncertainty of the future. They huddled together to gain whatever confidence they could from one another.

A brand new life lay ahead. Whether for better or worse I didn't know, couldn't even imagine. This was only the second time that I had ever been on a steamer. I could hardly remember the first time, almost eight years ago. Then the crossing of the English Channel had been very short, just a few hours, but it changed my self-concept completely. Now we would sail for five days before events would take another turn, a new direction on a different continent. I was sixteen years old, used to a sheltered environment during a turbulent era.

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Edmonton, AB T5T 1B4
PH: (780) 487-4941
e-mail: suemar@telus.net

In the bow of the lightly rolling vessel, I stood, a single, lonely figure. I was wearing my gray school uniform coat and gazing doggedly forward, facing the blank space ahead. I did not cry, but I felt the lurching of the ship repeat itself in my stomach.

I was determined not to join my parents and the rest of the passengers in the stern. I knew they were straining for their last look at England. It wasn't that I didn't want that final sighting, or that I wouldn't miss the old ways. Rather, I felt afraid and anxious, but I didn't want to admit it. I was in a panic.

Instead, I studied the gentle waves below, smelled fish and salt water, felt the cool wind on my face, and shivered. Ahead, there was nothing. No change in the deep water or the canopy above. No hint of what was to come. Seagulls flew mewling and circling, waiting for their meal of garbage. My thoughts turned to that one other time I had been at sea.

The date was March 28, l939. My parents and I were refugees after Hitler overran Czechoslovakia, our home. We had left behind most of our families and friends, and joined many other refugees on a harrowing train trip through Nazi Germany to the Hague, Holland. We were lucky. The journey was uneventful, we were not harassed, searched or taken off on trumped-up charges.

At last, we were ata the beachhead. I was excited for my first look at this strange body of water I had been told about. But we arrived after dark. I remember only very bright lights, strange smells and frightening noises. I drew back, hugged my favorite doll, Eva, and hung on hard to my Papa's hand. People ran about, shouting in varios tongues, pushing and bumping into us. I could see almost nothing, and felt lost and afraid in the crush..

We climbed up the gangway, over black lapping water onto the boat's deck.. Papa picked me up and showed me the vanishing lights on the land. He told me that somewhere behind those lights, far, far away were Praha and my grandparents, and all the people we knew and loved and everything we had ever known. He was so sad, his voice was unsteady. Mama cried.

The journey to England was short. I slept on a bench throughout the Channel crossing.

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Slowly, a few other passengers moved forward and looked out at the grey waves. They took no notice of me, and I was too preoccupied to bother with them. My mother's voice woke me into the present.

" Susie, there you are. We were looking for you. Didn't you want to watch us leave England?" She didn't understand. "It was sad leaving. I wonder if we'll ever come back."

I shrugged. "I prefer it here. This way I can see where we're going".

"But there's nothing to see out there. Come along we'd better find out where we're going to sleep. I think it's a big dormitory. We'll meet some of the other ladies and children." I took one last look, sighed and followed her below. I dreaded this trip, was afraid of what I would find at the end. At least this time, I would know the language, although the accents would be very different.

We joined the crush, threaded our way down several flights of stairs and along a number of corridors. People everywhere. They lugged their belongings and their children in both directions of the narrow passages. An air of unreality dominated the crowd. I felt as if I were floating over them, and noticed that almost none knew where they were supposed to be.

Occasionally there'd be a shout of "Here we are!" as some lost person found his or her cabin, and tried to gather the clan. Further confusion and consternation ensued as families realized that men and women were berthed in separate dormitories.

My mother navigated us to our quarters. Then she led me, with some assurance to our space. I was rather surprised at her ease, because she was notorious for getting lost and needing me to find the way. I let out a nervous giggle at this thought.

When we entered the dormitory with its tiers of bunks and crowd of women and children all milling about, I felt horror strike. The scene reminded me of the shelter we slept in at boarding school during the bombing at the beginning of the war. Worse still, it brought back pictures and newsreels I had seen of concentration camp barracks. I wanted to turn around and run away as far and fast as possible. I whirled around in horror. Nowhere to go.